



The New England Church Pulpit

New England Congregational Church UCC
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FESTIVAL OF INCARNATION

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Luke 2.1-7

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths, and laid him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.

The year was 1659. The Puritans were channeling Scrooge long before Dickens brought him to life in the Christmas Carol when they successfully banned the celebration of Christmas because it was not biblical. This is what happens when the Bible, taken at face value, is your only source of truth and your God is imprisoned in its pages. These misinformed and misguided Puritans ultimately ordered shops to stay open on Christmas day, requiring everyone to work as usual, and going to such lengths as banning holiday cakes and candles. They even convinced the Massachusetts legislature to declare Christmas celebrations illegal, a law that held sway for twenty-two years.

It wouldn't surprise me if these Puritans were the role model for Dr. Seuss's Grinch who stole Christmas because their hearts, like his, was three sizes too small. This is not one of our favorite memories of the Puritans from whom, incidentally, we Congregationalists descended. What an interesting paradox that we who love the festivities of the season have evolved from these ancestors who banned the holiday celebration because the eating and drinking and, God forbid, the kissing under the mistletoe were more fun than they thought God could handle.

John Buchanan of Fourth Presbyterian Church Chicago reminds us that this is the season of incarnation, the time we celebrate God coming in the form of something earthly and earthy. The theology of incarnation is the belief that God came to us in human form, in something and someone tangible, something and someone we could understand, namely in the person of Jesus. What could be more worldly than the Christmas story, what with an unwed pregnant teenager, a perplexed fiancé, a barn full of smelly animals, dirty shepherds, and three Tarot-card-reading star gazers? And if that wasn't enough, there's the account in Matthew's gospel that includes the blood-thirsty power-monger Herod who was so afraid that this newborn king might usurp his power that he had all of the male babies in the kingdom slaughtered to hedge his bets. Didn't the Puritans understand that we need a little merriment and a lot of mirth to cope with all of this worldly mess? Didn't they realize the

antidote to misery is a well-organized festival?

(*Christian Century*, Dec 13, 2011)

Donald Heinz, in his book entitled *Christmas: Festival of Incarnation*, reminds us that Christmas inaugurates and plays out the risks of incarnation, and therefore warrants our festivals and celebrations annually. He notes that to watch the festival of Christmas over time is to glimpse the descent of God into human festival, the religious spinning of the divine into matter not unlike Rumplestiltskin spinning straw into gold. One could think of religious festivals as fluorescent—absorbing light of *invisible* wave length and emitting light of *visible*, though sometimes flickering, holy, wave length. We experience the invisible God through the visible objects of God's creation. We know something of heavenly joy when we create earthly festivals.

The church has often over-spiritualized the Christmas story by calling us to make a manger in our hearts while missing the point of the story, namely that God comes to us in spirit through the material. God must like things since the world in God's image is made of things, and being created in God's image, we hunger for material culture because we live an embodied existence. Our homes are filled with beautiful decorations, some that sparkle with glitter and some that sparkle with the smile of a child when giving us one she has made. Our homes are filled with images of Santa and the baby Jesus, of reindeer on the rooftops, blinking lights on the trees and mistletoe, just in case we needed an excuse for a kiss at Christmas time. Images help secure the world of belief and thereby form believers. It takes tangible experiences for religion to take place.

Barbara Brown Taylor tells about a mobile home park in northern Georgia near her home that is quite ordinary except for one residence. By day the trailer is an eyesore, with dented baby blue aluminum siding and tiny windows that steam up from lack of good insulation. A large satellite dish in the front lawn is surrounded by gaudy plastic kids' toys littered about as if they were so many discarded presents in a garbage heap. But by night, she comments, this place is a wonderland. The many colored lights on the satellite dish give it an appearance of a 22nd century Christmas tree from outer space. The carport is rimmed with lights and the roof of the trailer has become a landing strip for Santa's sleigh, all decked out in colored lights and drawn by a full complement of reindeer. She conjectures that there are probably better uses for all the money it cost to decorate so elaborately; she suspects that the children need shoes more than they need colored lights. But, she says, there is a holy spark smoldering underneath all of the tinsel and voltage, a spark that transcends the *needs* of life. It is the spark of celebration that allows humanity to live with one foot in the world of financial oppression and one foot in the world of Christmas hope, the latter as important for having to live in the former.

Christmas becomes our opportunity to stage the play for the world to see the joy that became flesh in all of the things that can be seen, tasted, touched and heard. Here we can bring a bit of mirth to the mangled mess of Washington DC and the tiresome political debates that have become so embarrassingly petty. We can reenact the story in homes and in churches, putting lights on rooftops, tinsel on the trees, and giving parties that transcend the power of Herod or Washington or any other dictator to oppress the spirit even if he can wreak havoc on our lives. Here are gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh—treasured, tangible expressions of what God's coming to earth does for our souls.

Material culture arises to fill the space that is needed for religion to take place and attract thoughtful attention or devotional reflection. The material, the tangible, the stuff of our physical world bridges the divide between divine and human worlds. Like family heirlooms, they stimulate the memory of

things past and pass them on to new futures. Around them, a life of religious rituals and devotion can be constructed, maintained and preserved for future generations.

Each day the tragedy of the world fills our television, newspapers and our hearts. If it isn't Herod killing off his political rivals before they are even weaned, it's poverty and disease that undermine our joy. And yet, we are confounded by stories of transformative power when we hear the story of Mary and Joseph and the baby Jesus that is experienced in the outpouring of care for others in the midst of their tragedy. God in human form comes again and again in the people like magi who offer gifts of hope and sustenance when the Herods of our day have taken away life. This is why we can—and should—include Santa along with Jesus, Mary and Joseph; reindeer on sleighs beside cattle lowing at the manger; angels we have heard on high along with tinsel and ornaments high atop our Christmas trees.

The year is 2011. Ann Weems counters today the Puritan philosophy of the past in this poem:

Each year about this time I try to be sophisticated
and pretend I understand the bored expressions
relating to the "Christmas Spirit"
I nod when they say "Put the Christ back in Christmas,"
I say yes, yes, when they shout "Commercial" and
"Hectic, hectic, hectic..."

But somehow a fa-la-la keeps creeping out...
So I'll say it:
I love Christmas tinsel
and angel voices that come from the [kids'] beds upstairs.
And I say three cheers for Santa Claus
and the Salvation Army bucket
and all the wrappings and festivities and special warm feelings...
Hooray for Christmas trees
and candlelight...
I rejoice for the carnival of Christmas!...
I want to dance in the streets of Bethlehem...
For those of us who believe,
the whole world is decorated in love!

(‘O Lord You Were Born’ from *Kneeling at Bethlehem*)

Amen.

--Gary L. McCann

PASTORAL PRAYER

God, who is far beyond us, who speaks in languages foreign to our ears and who acts in ways that are strange to our way of thinking, be present with us this day as we conclude our Advent journey in anticipation of Christmas. We seek new life; we want to be midwives to the birth of peace in our world; and by our acts of justice and our deeds of joy, we pray that we may birth God in our world.

Speak to us in languages we can comprehend, and at the same time open our ears to hear you in the languages you are still speaking. We see unbridled excitement in the bright eyes of a child, and we recognize your eyes. We hear a baby crying in our midst, and if we are listening carefully, we will recognize your voice. We have seen the first snow of the season, and in it we hear your still small voice shushing us, telling us to quit worrying about shoveling it and just enjoy the beauty that it brings to the earth.

We pray not only for ourselves, but as worship in community should always lead us, we pray that others will hear your voice during this season as well: may those who grieve hear a word of consolation; may those who feel hated hear a word of love; may those who are afraid hear a word of hope; may those who are at war hear a word of peace. For those named and unnamed today who need to hear your voice, speak to them. And as we pray for you to speak, we offer ourselves to be your voice that through our actions, our attitudes, our deeds of kindness.

Come to us in all of the bright adornment of Christmas's reds and greens, in the tasty morsels of special sweets, in the elevated spirits of Christmas punch, in the gifts we receive and give, in the candles that captivate our senses and in the opportunities for both festive hubbub and quiet meditation. In this season of the child, may we remember that the one whose birth we celebrate told us that we know God best when we come with childlike wonder and awe. To that end, we pray "God bless us, everyone." Amen.